

Book Reviews

HOMAGE TO BOURDIEU

Pierre Bourdieu: agent provocateur. Michael Grenfell, 2004. London: Continuum; ISBN: 0826467091, paper, 214 pp., £12.60.

This book is presented as a comprehensive account of Bourdieu's life and work; however, I found that although it offers an excellent overview of Bourdieu's work, it draws very little on his life, perhaps respecting Bourdieu's own reluctance to expose his private self. As its subtitle 'agent provocateur' indicates, the book focuses on Bourdieu's intellectual and political intervention in the public sphere as a conscious attempt to resist given social realities and propose concrete changes. Although downplaying the private, the book starts with Bourdieu's biographical account, particularly focusing on his experiences of school, which would form his reproduction theories in the sociology of education from the very beginning of his work. Bourdieu's own trajectory from philosophy as the discipline in which he graduated to his subsequent interest in anthropology, sociology and ultimately politics maps his wider project of philosophizing sociology and using it as an intellectual platform from which to criticize politics and not rarely intervene actively in national and global policy making. Indeed throughout his work, Bourdieu tried to reconcile what Grenfell has identified as 'a chronic antipathy between the disciplines of sociology, philosophy and anthropology' (p. 13). The extent to which he was successful in doing that has yet to be discussed and debated, as the book explicitly limits its aim to a commentary of Bourdieu's overall project rather than critically engaging with it. As Grenfell states in his Introduction, the aim of the book is homage to Bourdieu and his radical politics (p. 4).

The book comprises three parts, including seven chapters, the Introduction and the Conclusion. Part One is the shorter section of the book, mainly outlining Bourdieu's biography with a very useful postscript where Bourdieu's main theoretical concepts are briefly presented. As such it provides a very good beginning to the subsequent discussions and could be ideal for any sort of introductory sessions to Bourdieu's work. The second part presents Bourdieu's sociological work in three chapters focusing on Algeria, Education, and Media and Culture respectively. Each chapter is carefully situated within the social, historical and political contexts that created the milieus within which Bourdieu's work, ideas and books emerged and developed. There are always connections to his own

life at the time, but again it is all about his public life as an ‘engaged intellectual’. Grenfell shows how Algeria spanned the whole of Bourdieu’s career and formed the basis of the development of his theory of praxis. Although Bourdieu’s impact on the sociology of education has been widely documented and discussed and indeed Grenfell’s contribution in this area has been pivotal, what this chapter particularly highlights is Bourdieu’s life-long fascination for the role of education not only in how individuals make sense of the world but perhaps more importantly in how through education they can be empowered to intervene in its making/changing. The last chapter of Part One clearly presents how Bourdieu’s sociological analyses of Media and Culture are both deeply embedded in the important role that art and culture have held historically in French society and highly critical of the social conditions of cultural production and consumption. The section on Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural resistance once again creates a link to the main aim of the book, highlighting Bourdieu’s political persona. Finally, the third part of the book looks into how economics and philosophical thought have shaped the development of Bourdieu’s ideas and analyses, concluding with a chapter on specific acts of resistance. This last part mainly addresses Bourdieu’s theoretical and political stance in the last decades of the twentieth century, highlighting his concrete formulation of a sociological philosophy. Globalization, the New Poor, neoliberalism and the role of the intellectuals are all themes that are discussed in this section in relation to how they were integrated in Bourdieu’s project. Of particular importance is the last chapter of this section and indeed of the book, where Grenfell focuses particularly on Bourdieu’s theory of knowledge and the philosophical questions it opens up in examining the relation between subjects, their social realities and the possibility of gaining scientific knowledge about the world.

Overall the book succeeds in its aim, namely in being a homage to Bourdieu’s work and although it cannot be argued that it offers something distinctive in Bourdieu’s scholarship, it does form an excellent panorama of Bourdieu’s work, ideas and concepts, which makes it a recommended reading for anybody interested in being introduced to Bourdieu’s work.

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BIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS FOUND WANTING AND FOUND GOOD

Reading biography. Carl Rollyson, 2004. New York, London, Shanghai: iUniverse; ISBN: 0595337473 paper, 105 pp., US\$12.95.